

August Wilson a Black Heritage Honoree

by John F. Dunn

On January 28 award-winning playwright August Wilson will be the 44th honoree in the Postal Service's Black Heritage series. The initial announcement indicates that the Forever rate stamp will be dedicated "on the Postal Service Facebook and Twitter pages." This is because on-site ceremonies are not being held during the Covid-19 pandemic; however, the site for the First Day of Issue cancellation will be Pittsburgh, Pa.

One of America's greatest playwrights, Wilson is hailed as a trailblazer for helping to bring nonmusical African American drama to the forefront of American theater. He collected innumerable accolades for his work, including seven New York Drama Critics' Circle Awards; a Tony Award, for 1987's "Fences"; and two Pulitzer Prizes, for "Fences" and 1990's "The Piano Lesson."

From Wikipedia we learn that Wilson was born Frederick August Kittel Jr. in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, the fourth of six children. His father, Frederick August Kittel Sr., was a Sudeten German immigrant, who was a baker/pastry cook. His mother, Daisy Wilson, was an African-American woman from North Carolina who cleaned homes for a living. He later wrote under his mother's surname. Life for Wilson and his other siblings was very tough because they were biracial. He struggled with finding a sense of belonging to a particular culture and didn't feel that he truly fit into African American culture or white culture until later in life.

Wilson's mother divorced his father and married David Bedford in the 1950s, and the family moved from the Hill District to the then predominantly white working-class neighborhood of Hazelwood, where they encountered racial hostility; bricks were thrown through a window at their new home. They were soon forced out of their house and on to their next home. The Hill District went on to become the setting of numerous plays in the famous Pittsburgh Cycle. His experiences growing up there with a strong matriarch shaped the way his plays would be written.

A drop-out from high school, Wilson, who said he had learned to read at the age of four, began reading black writers at the Carnegie library when he was 12 and spent the remainder of his teen years educating himself there. This led later to the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh "awarding" him an honorary high school diploma.

Always wanting to be a writer, at 20, he decided he was a poet and submitted work to such magazines as Harper's. He liked to write on cafe napkins because, he said, it freed him up and made him less self-conscious as a writer. He would then gather the notes and type them up at home.



In 1968, he co-founded the Black Horizon Theater in the Hill District of Pittsburgh. Among his early efforts was *Jitney*, which he revised more than two decades later as part of his 10-play cycle on 20th-century Pittsburgh. Wilson's Pittsburgh Cycle, consists of ten plays—nine of which are set in Pittsburgh's Hill District (the other being set in Chicago). The plays are each set in a different decade and aim to sketch the Black experience in the 20th century.

Among his many awards, in 1999 Wilson received a National Humanities Medal from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Their website provides additional insight, explaining that in Pittsburgh's ethnically diverse Hill District, he was surrounded by the sounds, sights and struggles of urban African

American life that would later fuel his creative efforts. But his appreciation for the culture in which he had grown up did not bloom fully until he moved to St. Paul, Minnesota, in his early thirties. From that distance, he gained an appreciation of the richness of the culture and the language of the place where he had spent his youth.

"In the Hill District, I was surrounded by all this highly charged, poetic vernacular which was so much part and parcel of life that I didn't pay any attention to it. But in moving to St. Paul and suddenly being removed from that environment and that language, I began to hear it for the first time and recognize its value," he said.

It wasn't until 1977 that he converted some of his poems into a play, but Wilson instead, said, his career began in 1979 with his work on *Jitney*. "Before that, I couldn't write dialog because I didn't value and respect the way that black people talked. I thought that, in order to make art out of it that, you had to change it. With *Jitney*, I decided I was just going to let them talk the way that they talked, and that was the beginning."

Back to Wikipedia, we learn a bit more about Wilson's perspective on the unique black culture. Though he was a writer dedicated to writing for theater, a Hollywood studio proposed filming Wilson's play *Fences*. He insisted that a black director be hired for the film, saying: "I declined a white director not on the basis of race but on the basis of culture. White directors are not qualified for the job. The job requires someone who shares the specifics of the culture of black Americans." The film remained unmade until 2016, when Denzel Washington directed the film *Fences*, starring Washington and Viola Davis. It earned Wilson a posthumous Oscar nomination.